

A DAY AT THE RACES

It is probably unknown today, even amongst aficionados and cognoscenti, that Sawbridgeworth was formerly, for one day only, the centre of the horse racing fraternity in England. On Tuesday 26 January 1841, after at least two postponements due to inclement weather, Sawbridgeworth was host to a major horse race meeting. This race meeting was the brainchild of Sir Henry George Ward and Rowland Alston. Both men were prominent, wealthy landowners in the locality. The course for the racing was organised so that it was (except for where it crossed a road) conducted wholly on land owned by these two men.

Sir Henry George Ward GCMG MP (1797-1860) was a diplomat and a politician (see Figure 1). He was Member of Parliament for St. Albans from 1832 until 1837. After which, from 1837 until 1849, he was Member of Parliament for Sheffield. Sir Henry served the country abroad for much of his life, being the Governor of British Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). He also served in Mexico, Sweden, Spain, the Netherlands, Greece and finally India, where he is buried. Importantly for our story, Sir Henry owned Gilston Park, where the race started from.



Figure 1 Sir Henry George Ward GCMG MP

Rowland Alston MP (1782 – 1865) fought at Copenhagen in 1807 with the 3rd^R regiment of Foot Guards (see Figure 2). He was Member of Parliament for Hertfordshire from 1835 until 1841, during which time he supported the Corn Laws. He was deputy Lord Lieutenant for Hertfordshire, Essex and Bedfordshire, as well as being a Justice of the Peace for Hertfordshire and Essex. Rowland lived at Pishiobury (the still existing Alston Oak), and at 48 Harley Street in London. He is named on a commemorative plaque affixed to the south wall inside Great St. Mary's church. The plaque notwithstanding, Rowland passed away in London, and is probably buried there. He was a major landowner hereabouts.



Figure 2 Rowland Alston MP

The course was of a steeplechase type. It began adjacent to Eastwick Wood (owned by Sir Henry Ward). From there it progressed to Overhall Farm, before turning left to Great Penny's Farm. At this point, the course turned right, crossing Fiddlers' Brook, which was reportedly at that time 17 feet wide there, and moving on to Rowland Alston's property of Sayes Park Farm. The riders then crossed the High Wych Road, moving on to Rowney Farm, before finishing near Alston Oak. In all, the course was four miles long and included 38 fences! A very tiring race for all concerned.

The headquarters for this event was the White Lion public house at the junction of London Road and Cock (now Bell) Street. Here a considerable party assembled for the day's events. Three of the notables coming up from London were a Mr. Tilbury of Piccadilly, (often called 'Old Tilbury') who was a noted horse dealer, and who had a type of gig carriage named after him (see Figure 3). The other two attending were Mr. Jack Elmore and Mr. Jim Mason, both also noted horse dealers. Interestingly, 'Old Tilbury' was a staunch teetotaler. His comments on the headquarters being a public house are not recorded, which is a pity!

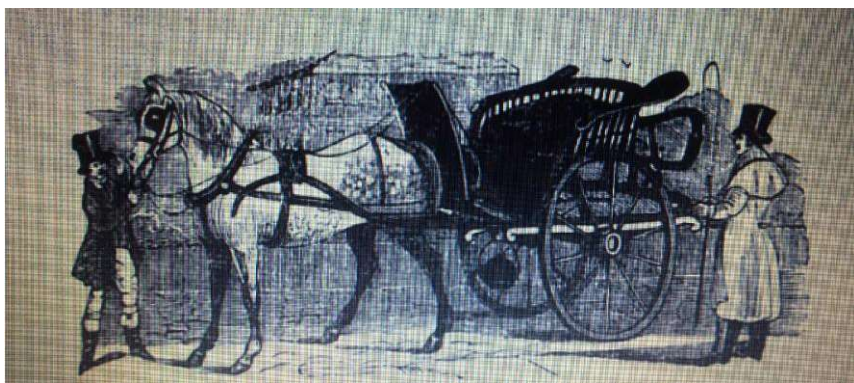


Figure 3 A 'Tilbury' gig of 1839

There were only two races scheduled for the day. The first race was a 25 Sovereign Sweepstake which was open to 'All England'. This race was won by a horse called Jupiter, owned by a Mr. Bond. In second place was a horse called Goblin, with third place going to a horse called Tallyho.

The second race was a 5 Sovereign Sweepstake. This race was won by a horse named Revealer, owned by a Mr. Smith. Second was Union, and third was The Hunter. The day's racing over, all returned home. The event was never repeated, possibly it was not seen as a success, and over the years it has been sadly forgotten. However, for that one day, Sawbridgeworth was of importance.

AFTERWORD

This race meeting was not the only connection between Sawbridgeworth and the racing fraternity. In his younger days, the locally famous Sir Edmund Broughton Barnard was an accomplished horseman and rode under Jockey Club rules, once winning 3 races in the same day. Later in life in 1888, he was involved in some illicit activity at Northampton races which resulted in him being banned from all National Hunt racecourses, and being warned off Newmarket Heath. Edmund appealed against this ban and was presumably successful because he went on to become an avid racegoer and a staunch supporter of the National Hunt.

Tharbies/Tharbees Farm was acquired by the Barnard family c1846. It has been reported that at the end of the 19th century Edmund Barnard had 100 – 150 racehorses stabled there. Presumably Edmund did not own all of them, but was involved in the training of them. Accordingly, he built his own private racecourse for this. It ran from Tharbies/Tharbees Farm near Allen's Green as far as the Bull public house.

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